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James Kao Interview

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Interviewer: Alice Haller
Artist: James Kao
Location: Artist's home and studio, Chicago, IL
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Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Art History during the 2016 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project. Conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.

Portrait of James Kao 2016 courtesy of the artist.

Artist Bio: **James Kao** was born and raised in Houston, Texas. After studying philosophy and focusing on the texts of Ludwig Wittgenstein at the University of Chicago, he worked as a bakery buyer for a specialty foods retail chain in Southern California. In 2001, James forwent his corporate career and returned to Chicago to take classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he received an MFA from the Painting and Drawing Department. He is Assistant Professor of Art at Aurora University in Aurora, IL, and is co-founder and co-director of 4th Ward Project Space in Chicago, IL.
http://www.jameskao.org/index.html

Interview Transcript:

Alice Haller: What I noticed about your work was the scale of it. How did you feel about working on larger pieces?

James Kao: That's a good question. I think scale is really important. It's the first thing that we see. A lot of times we say we see something like a tree first, but really we see how big something is first, and that's how we see [the work]. Do we come up close or do we step back? So that's an important decision, and it's one that I think about a lot. I like working on small things because you can see it all at once. The big paintings are more, in a way, battles. I have a hard time finishing them. They're easy to start, but at the middle, it's like a hard chess game where you decide to stay in one place for a long time.

[He makes note of two very large pieces in his painting room and says that he's been working on them for years very slowly].

In terms of how we experience them, I think the larger paintings let us go inside of them. They are like a world. Along with the scale, I think of the shape of the painting. I'm interested in how the square is a perfect shape. It's a sign for modernity. The strange thing about the square is if you hang it on a wall, it looks like a vertical rectangle. I don't know why, but it's strange when a square stops being a square. And if you want the square paintings to look like squares, that's kind of a problem. So a lot of my work is just off square – just a little bit wider than it is tall—the work looking like a square is more important than it being a square.

AH: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? How you decided you wanted to be an artist?

JK: When I was a kid – maybe first grade – I think we always say "I want to be an astronaut" or whatnot, but I think then I said "I wanted to be an artist." That's what I said early, early on. That quickly changed to… that disappeared. I stopped wanting to do that. I wanted to be a doctor or maybe a writer. I went to college, I studied philosophy, and then I moved to L.A., and I worked at a very business-y job. I was living on Venice Beach, which was always sort of a hippity-artsy community, and one day, kind of on a lark, I decided to go and talk to one of the guys who had a studio and started taking lessons with him. After a couple years, he said I should go to art school. I thought that was a very good idea so I took all the money I saved and went. That's sort of a short bio. I think my job [in L.A.] was great because I was very young and had a real salary – much more than I make now, and L.A. is a great city to be in when you're young, when you have lot's of money. But I had never been to a lot of museums… it wasn't a regular feature in my life. But once I started making art, they became interesting to me.

AH: How would you define or categorize your art?

JK: I make paintings and drawings. I'm interested in observation and how we see the world. Looking at the world is very, very… it's a nice thing to do. It can be very passive, but it can also be very active. When you're really looking and observing, nothing else matters – sound disappears, time slows down, and that's a nice place. It's also a place where we really get to see things that are only revealed when we're looking very closely. A lot of the work comes from that kind of seeing. I think that the newer work still starts from observation. It doesn't quite look like the world that we occupy, and I think that things I'm interested are trees right now, the natural world, animals, childhood, angels. I'm interested in a very naive, unadulterated world. A world we could say good or bad, natural or unnatural. In our world those things don't really exist. When the world we look at starts to deviate from that sort of imagined world, that's when the work sort of really… invention becomes important. So, I think the experiences I have in the world kind of impact that. I spent a lot of time in New Hampshire one summer in the forest. I got to understand what the forests were like and see what a moose does by itself and \see a bear and hear strange animals. I saw squirrels that are ubiquitous all over the world and began having strange interactions with them. There is an image that is repeated in almost every work – a dead squirrel at the bottom of the page. I saw a squirrel fall from the sky one day I was walking home from the train. I knew instantly that it was a young squirrel – a child. It had fallen from its nest and it had landed just in front of me. And it made an awful shrieking sound as it laid there with its mouth open, and I didn't know what to do, and I was horrified and I ran away – I didn't know what to do. And it sort of haunted me for a day – "oh, I abandoned this dying squirrel." Also, I put the plants out on the balcony over the summer and they often get attacked by squirrels. I had a squirrel get into the apartment once, which is just havoc because they're nervous and they move in a very nervous fashion and everywhere they go is a little disaster they land on. So, the squirrels are a big thing, I just couldn't escape. And the blackbird… there's a poem by Wallace Stevens called "13 Ways to Look at a Blackbird", and it talks about how we see the world and how what we see is really metaphor. And so there's a blackbird at the top of the page on most of the work. Those are my devices now because they give me a way to start. When I want to work, but I don't know exactly what I want to work on, I can find those two images and then something else can follow.

AH: I also had a question about your work with trees. I noticed your Gingko series and I know gingko trees are native to China. So I was wondering if that had to do with your background or anything?

JK: They are from China! And I remember going to Beijing… this must have been 2000 and I remember leaving the airport and seeing acres and acres of gingko trees. It was a forest of gingko trees, but clearly not a natural forest. But they were endless – all these giant gingko trees and they have that very beautiful, peculiar leaf, and they're massive trees. And they're green almost all year. And I knew that they're also very good at cleaning the air – that's one of the reasons

they plant them. So that was sort of my first relationship to the gingko tree. So the gingko drawings that you saw were actually from Hyde Park. I went to college here, I've lived here for a long time. It's like home. And I don't know if you know, but in the summer time we get these microbursts here in Chicago, and they are as strong as a tornado--but they stay in five square fee. They come in the city, and there are all these trees by the lake in Hyde Park, and every summer we lose some of these big trees; and so a burst came by, and those drawings were of those fallen gingko trees. It's strange to see a tree dying because they don't die instantly. In fact, you don't ever know when a tree dies even when you cut it down you don't know if you've actually killed it.

AH: Have you ever specifically addressed your Asian American identity in you work? I noticed there was a piece with chopsticks. I wonder if you could elaborate on that more?

JK: Yeah. I think when we come into this world of "oh I want to be an artist" and you start to understand that making a [pretty] picture is not the goal. The goal is to really communicate or convey something, and we start thinking about things that we're interested in. So those were really early paintings I made. They were images of chopsticks and corn on the cob; and I do remember that when I was growing up and… you know corn is a fun food to eat and in the grocery store they sell little corn holders that look like corn ears. My mom would never get them because we didn't need them, but we would have chopsticks that were just good enough. If you were careful and disciplined enough you could get them to work [as corn holders]. So I guess that's one place I was explicitly thinking about growing up in the states in a Chinese family – and food is a big part of how we take in culture. Not just literally the food we eat but how and when we eat. I guess how and when we eat is just as important as what we eat.
More recently, I spent time in San Francisco and at the time I think the police chief was a Chinese woman – which was just baffling, she was a tiny petite woman too. So there's just Chinese people everywhere [in San Francisco]. You know, there's 80-year old Chinese folks who speak English better than I do, which is unusual for me, you know. If I meet an elderly Chinese person, my assumption is that they are an immigrant, but that's not really the case in San Francisco. I mean, they're immigrants, too, but generally they've been in America since the 1800s. And I was thinking a lot about Chinese language and writing because it's something you see all over San Francisco and kind of relating that to pictures because that's what they are – they're pictograms and so a lot of the drawings from five or six years ago are just like pictograms. They're not Chinese characters, but I was thinking about that. They're made with red color which for Chinese folks is a very auspicious color.

AH: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that featured Asian American artists and if so, what was that experience like?

JK: I was in a show once with Mie Kongo and Sarah Nishiura, and we're three Asian -- I guess Asian American artists. It was the first time that I had been in a show with just Asian artists and I

think we all knew that and that was a really nice thing to know that. We're all keenly aware of our cultures and where we are today in Chicago and respectful for all that, but none of our work is explicit about being political or about identity. I think it's more [viewed] inside of the work in a way. There are a lot of aspects of my life with strong politics or maybe even radical politics; that's not always part of my artistic life.

AH: Is it really important to your identity to identify as Asian American?

JK: Yeah, well I don't know if I go through that conscious state of "I am Asian American" or "Chinese American." It's just, I am. And that's a big part of me. I don't think it's important that I'm a boy or 5'10" or whatever that's just what I am and I think those are things that… I don't know, that's just who I am! And I think because of that a lot of things I do, act, think, come from where I come from. I think that… you know in the earlier work the oranges are a big part of the work and I've been listening to a lot of Nina Simone and there's that song where she talks about oranges that came over from China, and that's a really nice thing to think about because it's a beautiful song like "Suzanne";[1] and there are Suzannes in my life who are all special women. The oranges are kind of a thing in my family. After dinner there were always oranges that we cut up and that was our dessert, and it wasn't because we didn't appreciate cookies or cake or that stuff. It was just what we needed after eating, and I remember we always had these giant bags of oranges… they're the kind of bags that I don't see in regular grocery stores. I grew up in Houston, and I think there were some markets that sold bulk oranges – I'm talking about thirty pound bags of oranges, and there was always one in the corner of the kitchen; and we went through them! But that's what we needed, and I think that kind of thing is part of my Asian American-ness, I guess.

AH: Over the years, has there been a shift in exhibitions in what they've been like or what the experiences have been like?

JK: I think these days, if I am fortunate enough with this exhibition, I'm much more relaxed at it. I'm not nervous – you know. I'm nervous for the work, but I think in terms of being in the social place where you're not quite sure what to do or who you're supposed to interact with, those things… I think I'm comfortable with myself and that's less important. I think the exhibitions… I feel stronger about the work. The work is much more personal now, I think.

AH: Can you tell me about the 4th Ward Project Space?

JK: It's an exhibition space that I started with two colleagues – Mika Horibuchi and Valentina Zamfirescu. It's in the basement here; it's about 17 x 17 feet. It's a really nice project to be

[1] Nina Simone "Suzanne lyrics" 1969, "Suzanne takes you down to her place by the river…and she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China."

involved in. We built it. It was a very, very raw space with crumbling bricks and lots of strange wires and we made it very pretty and put lights in. We're interested in showing good artists who, for whatever reasons, are somewhat underexposed. That's been our goal since we started. This is our second year.

AH: There was a quote by AB (Art Business) that said that your work is simple and not complicated. How do you feel about that?

JK: Wow. That's really funny. I remember when I was living in L.A. and I was studying… my mentor had said when you go to art school and become an artist, your job is to just make the work. And if somebody likes the work, you don't care. And if somebody doesn't like the work, you don't care. You just keep making the work. And that kind of was a nice preparation for the world. But sure, I think the work is simple. I'm interested in being organized and sometimes simple is a nice way to organize the work. I think the work is much more complicated. I guess in a way it doesn't faze me. I don't know if those are always good values – "Is simple good?" "Is complicated good?" I am now much more so interested in complicated. I want a lot of information in the work.

AH: Looking at your sketches, you're very talented technically. How do you use your technical skill in your more abstract work. How do you connect it?

JK: I always start with something that I see – like a shape. So I might start with the space between leaves. And I'll start by putting things down. And then I start to look at what's there, and once I find something there, I start. So that's where that transition happens.

AH: Do you use a lot of inspiration from negative space?

JK: I look at that a lot. Looking at the world is different than… Well, we often think we look at the world when we name things, but really that's our brains doing a lot more work than our eyes. And when we can see things that our brain doesn't know, that's when our eyes really become important. So I might see a car outside, and I might not actually see that it's got four doors, but I'll say "yeah there's a four door out there" because it appears to me that way even if I only see one side of the car. But if there's something that I see that my brain doesn't know that might be the interval between the car and the person next to it, that's something that takes longer for us to comprehend because our brain isn't preprogrammed to know it. That's the kind of thing that I'm really interested in. It's really slow and you have to be quiet and stare.

AH: Do your past studies in philosophy influence your work?

JK: When I first came to art school, I was like "oh yeah, I'm going to figure it all out. I'm going to make paintings and philosophy and that will be the end all – for a day." But really, that's kind

of how art functions. I think the study of philosophy – the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein – is really important to me. The ideas became how I see the world. Wittgenstein is as a part of me as being American or Asian American or being a boy or whatever. So that's the perspective or the lens that I've been given. Through all those things and kind of shaded lenses, I try to see the world as clearly as one ought to – like all the privileges I've had of having gone to fancy schools, also being a man in the world and whatnot, and I try to see all that maybe isn't so obvious. I did make one portrait of Wittgenstein once and some landscapes of where he was, but that's the closest of me trying to think of philosophy in the work other than just that's just how I see the world.

AH: Can you tell me about your experiences as an art teacher?

JK: I've taught at a few different schools. I taught at Dominican University for a few years, I taught at the [School of the] Art Institute for a few years in Chicago, and right now I teach at Aurora University out in the suburbs. You know, they're all very different schools. Different mostly in -- I think -- the ambitions of the students. I think at Aurora, the art students are mostly the first people in their families to have gone to college. In the Art Institute, it's…, to go to art school it's much more of a privilege. Generally, those students there, they come from privileged backgrounds. And Dominican was kind of in between. I'm speaking very generally. You think that the students at the Art Institute are much more talented than students anywhere else because it's the "art school" in town, right? But that's not really true. We all kind of have the same potential and ability. I think a lot of it is our ambitions like "oh I really want to do this… I really want to learn how to draw…" then yeah, you're probably going to be able to learn how to draw. It's also sort of confirmed this idea that we really do learn how to draw and paint. Because my students anywhere that I've taught like Aurora or Domincan are really able to make work at an extremely high level. I think to learn how to be an artist is much more than learning how to draw and paint. It's really thinking about art and looking at art, and I think that makes it hard if you're not near a lot of artists or not near a lot of folks who are really engaged in that process. That's where teaching at the Art Institute becomes really different. You know, there's a museum out the back door for you to look at, and everyone there is an artist. That's all they think about is how to think about art and what art does. Being at a university is nice because there's all these different ways to be in the world and think about the world.

AH: What are you currently working on?

JK: I'd like to finish these large paintings… There's a couple things here that I'd like to be working on

[he handed me an abstract sketch that depicted a sort of animal]

AH: Is this supposed to be an animal?

JK: Yeah I think so. I think a lot about our relationship to the world and this idea that some people might call the Anthropocene age. The geologists don't think that makes sense because they have standards for geological age, but I think it's fair to say that we as humans have really marked just about every aspect of the earth. You go in a forest, and it's probably less than a hundred years old. It was probably cleared and then it came back. There's a handful of forests in the world that have not been cut down. It's really interesting for me to think about forests like that because it's the epitome of nature, but it's not. Then in New Hampshire where all the forests have been cut down then they came back, you find an old beer can or beer bottle that's eighty years old, but you you're not supposed to take it out of the forest. You think "oh that's garbage," but it's actually part of the history of the forest. So [in the painting] there's people here, there's this strange sheep-ish animal. I always wanted to see a big horned sheep in the wild. I go to Colorado somewhat regularly, and they live there! I've been in the mountains, but… That's like my mythical animal.

AH: I noticed in a lot of your work there are animal shapes… What really drew me to your work was your use of bunnies in one piece. I'm interested in your use of animals.

JK: I met this person, and we were having lunch. It was like the second time we had had lunch together, and we were talking about our Chinese zodiac signs. I said, "Oh, I'm a tiger," and she said that she was a tiger too. Then she looked at me and said, "Oh, you're not a tiger." Then I go, "I am a tiger!" I think I was 35, like I *know* I am [a tiger]. Then I went home, and I was really upset that this woman had stripped my identity for 35 years as a tiger. The truth is that the New Year for the Chinese New Year doesn't fall in line with our [Roman] calendar. If I had been born two days later, I would have been a rabbit. I've always known this, but I am a tiger. Anyway, I was really upset and googled all this stuff just to verify that I'm on the right side of the New Year. I knew this because this was something you grow up with--this history, your parents know this and whatnot. It turns out that I had a lot of the characteristics, if you will, of a rabbit. "Damn!" I was thinking about that, and the rabbit image came out. I was traveling a lot then, and I was in St. Louis, and there were all these giant sculptures of rabbits downtown. They were really goofy, but they were everywhere -- these big rabbit sculptures. Then I was in Baltimore -- this was a few years ago -- and do you remember those Sigg water bottles? They were supposed to be uber-safe because they're made of aluminum and not plastic. It turned out there was some sort of lining that was made out of plastic that was poisonous to you over time. So, if you had an old one, you could go to Whole Foods and get a new one. I went to get a new one, and they only had Peter Rabbit water bottles, and that's something I have with me all the time just so I have water with me. Then when I was in New Hampshire, I was talking to someone and I asked, "Oh, did you hear those sirens last night?" Then I learned it was just coyotes. And he chuckled, "Oh, you silly city boy" or whatever. Then David contines, "If you're really lucky, you'll hear this really rare sound of an owl killing a rabbit." It's rare because rabbits don't make a lot of noises, but I guess, at the moment of death, they make this god awful shriek. If you're out in the

wilderness, you will hear it. So again, the rabbit became more important and became part of the work. Animals… they're part of nature if you can say that. They're part of unadulterated nature, so they stand for that.

END.